

## Berichte und Kommentare

### On the Limits of the "Thunder Complex" in Australasia

A Reply to Gregory Forth

Robert Blust

#### 1. Introduction

In a recent issue of this journal Forth (1989) has extended the documentation for the "thunder complex," one of the most distinctive and widespread ethnological markers known in Southeast Asia. This culture complex, which is focally concerned with the belief that mockery of animals will precipitate a punitive thunderstorm entailing some type of physical transformation of the offender, was first reported by Needham (1967) for the Austronesian-speaking Penan of Borneo and for various Austroasiatic-speaking Semang (Negritos) of Malaya. At the same time, the characteristic constellation of features which makes the thunder complex so readily recognizable has never been reported from any other region of the earth. Given the lack of demonstrable linguistic relationship between the Penan and the Semang, and the improbability that these geographically separated forest nomads have ever been in a direct borrowing relationship, Needham concluded that the close similarity of beliefs about mockery of animals and punitive thunderstorms in both groups is a product of independent development guided by innate psychological "archetypes."

Needham's psychological interpretation (and the somewhat different psychological interpretation of Freeman 1968) was challenged by Blust (1981), who demonstrated that the set of beliefs and behaviors in question is not restricted to the Penan and the Malayan Negritos, but is widely distributed in the Philippines, Borneo, and Malaya. In accordance with a general schema for the interpretation of culture trait distributions, he con-

cluded that the thunder complex probably was borrowed from non-Austronesian-speaking Negritos by early Austronesian-speakers in the Philippines circa 4,000 B.C.<sup>1</sup> Once nativized and augmented with features it probably did not have in its original form, the thunder complex became part of the cultural heritage of the Austronesian-speaking peoples in their ever-expanding migrations to the south and east.

In his contribution to the debate Forth sides squarely with the writer in advocating a historical explanation for the known distribution of the thunder complex, but complains that Blust (1981) has slighted the ethnological record for the thunder complex in eastern Indonesia. In one sense (that of richness of documentation) Forth's complaint undoubtedly is justified. However, in another, more essential sense, Forth's criticism is wide of the mark, since the hypothesis advanced in Blust 1981 attributed the thunder complex to a prehistoric society which was ancestral not only to the modern Austronesian-speaking societies of western and eastern Indonesia, but also to those of Oceania.

The further discussion of these issues can be appreciated more fully through reference to the following figure, a conventional Stammbaum, or family-tree diagram, commonly employed in historical linguistics to represent (in an idealized form) the process of linguistic differentiation within a group of related languages. As such it makes an explicit claim about the order of prehistoric linguistic splits which gave rise to the modern Austronesian languages. The great majority of language groups for which the thunder complex is reported in Blust 1981 belong to the WMP branch of Austronesian. The only exceptions to this statement are the Austroasiatic-speaking Malayan aborigines and two groups in eastern Indonesia which speak CMP languages, the Manggarai and Ngadha in the

<sup>1</sup> A date of circa 3,500 B.C. now appears more likely to me (cf. Blust 1984/85).